

If Voltaire Had Been a Czech . . .

By Richard A. Shweder

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Whatever isn't science, Miroslav Holub believes, isn't worth bothering with.

SHEDDING LIFE

Disease, Politics, and Other Human Conditions.

By Miroslav Holub.

Translated by David Young.

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THE spirit that haunts the essays that make up "Shedding Life" is the ghost of the Enlightenment, a wraith of reason deriding all Dark Age flights of fancy. Miroslav Holub, a Czech polymath with degrees in medicine and the humanities, is convinced that the world woke up and became good 300 years ago in Western Europe. Science, above and against all else is his message — above and against Marxism, parapsychology,

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Zen, yoga, animal rights advocates, alternative medicine, Hindu gods, J. R. R. Tolkien, postgraduate mystics, California philosophers and anyone or anything either pre-modern or post-modern.

In "The Death of Butterflies," Holub reminisces about his past, when the "natural scientist" and "the lover of angel wings" within himself were still fused. Twenty years later, "Blake grew up," he tells us. Now only Darwin remains.

It is tempting to read Holub as though he is trying to be Lewis Thomas, Buckminster Fuller, Jacob Bronowski (and perhaps a bit of James Thurber) rolled into one. In "No," he extols the Caesarean section as a heroic act of resistance to politically correct natural childbirth, which he associates with things pinko and greenie. In "Apes, in Particular," he writes that the indignation of animal rights advocates about cages "becomes dubious compared to the plight of children shut up in apartments with psychopathic parents, incestuous or sadistic fathers, alcoholic mothers, or bigoted families who punish disobedience with blows and treat leukemia with prayer." In "A Concert in Moravia," he describes his experiences at

an international ecology meeting held in southwestern Mexico and, looking over the local cultural scene, casts his vote in favor of cultural imperialism: let them be "victims of Van Gogh," "wounded by Monet," "infected by Picabia," "colonized by Picasso."

In "Shedding Life," the signature essay to the collection, which is translated by David Young, he composes a rhapsody to the lymphocytes, adrenal glands and peptides of a dead muskrat that has been shot in his empty swimming pool. The best way to overcome the mind-body problem, this man of science and man of letters apparently believes, is to draw our attention to Mozart's kidney infections and bouts of colic and to write poetry about white blood cells.

Holub can be eloquent, and occasionally likable: "I've always had the feeling that our only chance in life is to stick with people who are discriminated against and ostracized. Otherwise we find ourselves in the same corner as the power-hungry clowns who always succeed because they wait to see who wins and then rush in at the right moment." And he can be funny, as when he describes the strategy of the students at a 1948 anti-Communist demonstration in

Prague who had discovered that when they sang the national anthem the advancing soldiers would stop and raise their guns to their chests. But for the most part his irony fails, and declines into sarcasm. He tries too hard to be clever. His writing seems forced, even ostentatiously intellectual.

In "Otters, Beavers and Me," Holub describes his fruitless attempt to experience the world as does Lewis Thomas and to feel "exultation and a rush of friendship" in the presence of those playful animals. He remarks: "I came to the conclusion that my patterns are Czech. Through them, I accept the fact that creatures deemed full of life by an American are apt to be seen as fatally lost by us Czechs, even when we are in an otherwise quite atypical state of bearable lightness of being."

Alas, in the spirit of international understanding I offer these three hypotheses about Holub's peculiar genius. Either (a) far too much is lost in translation; or (b) the cultural and metaphysical jet lag between the United States and central Europe is greater than one might have supposed; or (c) this type of specter of the Enlightenment can be truly frightening. □